

Traditional Mechanism of Controlling Violence in Rivers State Nigeria

Obenade Moses^{1*}, Chinogonum D. Chuku²

¹National Centre for Technology Management (Federal Ministry of Science & Technology), South-South Office, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

²Capitain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rumuola, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: Every society has in its system a mechanism of controlling violence and or settling conflicts related to violence. This paper focuses on the traditional means and or mechanism of resolving violence related conflicts in Nigeria and Africa, with Rivers State as a case study. Rivers State is one of the thirty-six (36) states of Nigeria. It is a heterogeneous society with diverse ethnic nationalities fused together for political and administrative convenience. However, in terms of controlling violence virtually all the ethnic groups in the state share some similarities in resolving violence related cases. To this extent, therefore, the paper seeks to identify the roles of traditional rulers in controlling violence; it examines the effectiveness of the traditional means in the past in relation to the present judicial system. In view of this, the paper highlights the significance of the traditional means of controlling violence in Nigeria. This study examines the extent to which colonial and external influence has impacted on the traditional means of controlling crime. The paper is purely qualitative in nature and therefore relies more on secondary data sources. The findings of this study reveal that before colonial administration in Nigeria, the traditional means of controlling violence was very effective. The study recommends that traditional rulers should ensure that their traditional institutions should be a synergy between the traditional judicial system and the modern judicial system. This synergy would help to ensure effective crime control in Rivers State and indeed Nigeria.

Key words: Rivers State, traditional rulers, violence, control, institution, mechanism, Chiefs.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is the general assumption by most western scholars that pre-colonial African societies had no system of administration: that is no law, no order, no government and hence no civilization. This assumption has long been seen as not only subjective, but grossly erroneous. To this end, they further postulated that Africans are primitive, barbaric, atavistic and backward.

On the other hand, African scholars were quick to reply, that such views are Eurocentric. In their views, – Afrocentric

view, these European writers were of this assumption because they want to undermine African development. They went further to proof that Africa had her own civilization long before western civilization. This forms the central thesis of the works of Walter Rodney.

The central discourse in this paper is that Traditional African societies had in-built mechanism of controlling violence. This mechanism revolves around their culture and other traditional institutions. For instance, Boege (2006), stressed that traditional African societies, indeed, had well organized and well established system of administration where public order was provided and maintained; where laws were made and implemented; where inter-communal and inter-tribal conflicts were settled. The emphasis here is on how laws concerning violence are made and how they are implemented.

To illustrate this point, issues relating to arms twisting are handled differently from issues relating to bloodletting. Issues relating to arm twisting are regarded as minor issues and could be settled by family chiefs and it attracts lower/lesser fines. On the other hand, issues related to violence and or bloodlettings are settled by the community and it attracts severe penalty (Chuku and Amadi, 2005). This paper argues that the Traditional means of controlling violence in pre-colonial Nigeria was very effective and could also be employed in this modern and post-modern era. It therefore, recommends for the continuation of this method.

Rivers State Nigeria was chosen as a case study. However, due to the numerous ethnic groups in the state, more emphasis was placed on Ikwerre and Ogoni. The paper is organized into various sub-sections, beginning with introduction and terminating at conclusion and references.

II. PROFILE OF RIVERS STATE

2.1 Location

political marginalization, environmental degradation and economic pauperization remained among the people, such that a separate Bayelsa State was carved out of Rivers State by the military government in 1996 (www.citypopulation.de/php/ng-admin.php).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Conceptual Clarification

In this paper, certain concepts and or terms appear frequently. It is therefore important to explain these concepts in relation to how they are used in the paper.

Tradition

Oxford Dictionary of sociology (Scott and Marshall, 2005:668) defines “tradition as a set of social practices which seek to celebrate and include certain behavioural norms and values, implying continuity with a real or imagined past, and usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of symbolic behaviour”. This definition is comprehensive as it conveys the essence of tradition, particularly in respect to the subject interest of this paper. Traditional societies on the other hand, as the same dictionary conceptualizes it are usually contrasted with industrial, urbanized capitalists modern society. It is often referred to as hunting and gathering settlements. Comparing traditional societies with modern or industrialized societies implies negative traits associated with being backward, primitive and non-scientific. In whichever way the concept traditional society is conceptualize, it refers to people, their mode or method of doing things, such as cloth type, house type, marriage, system more precisely in this context, how they maintain law and order in their societies.

Violence: To spoil, harm or ruin someone or something – Oxford Dictionary. Extreme cases of violence involve bloodletting, arson, bodily injury, and so on.

Deity: This refers to a god or goddess used by traditional societies to check violence among citizens.

Traditional Rulers: Traditional ruler could be defined as a person who by virtue of his ancestral position occupies the throne or stool of an area, where he governs according to the tradition of his people.

In Rivers State traditional rulers are recognized by their titles, thus, there are titles such as Nye-we-ali - or Eze for Ikwerre Chiefs, Oba in Ogbaland, Mene in Ogoniland, Amanyanabo/Amadabo in Kalabari/Okrika.

Natural Rulers and the Mechanism of Controlling Violence

The place of traditional or natural rulers in African societies cannot be over emphasized. Traditional rulers are generally regarded as the custodian of the norms and values of the society.

Boeje (2006) opined that traditional rulers possess accurate local knowledge about their respective societies. This knowledge and practice date back to many centuries. The

traditional rulers are therefore the very pivot on which the mechanism of controlling violence in most African societies revolve.

Technically, they could not do this alone, as elders, chiefs, women groups and even youths constitute part of the mechanism of checking violence.

Chuku and Amadi (2005), explained that this system of controlling violence was in place until the colonial era, even at colonial and post-colonial era. Boeje (2006) also argues that traditional rulers were accorded with the responsibility of administering the local people during the colonial era. In fact the traditional rulers were used by the colonial administrations like a second tier of government and were able to assist colonial administrator in many respects.

Adesoji (2010:417) observed that within pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional rulers held tremendous power and exercised considerable influence. Alagoa (2005) also notes that different political centres created their own institutions in pre-colonial Nigeria. He posits that popular tradition represents the House heads or Chiefs of the Niger Delta City States as virtual despots and the Amanyanabo or Kings as responsible for the overall administration of his people.

Lawal (1999), Igbafe, (1989) also lend credence to the view that in pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional rulers were veritable custodians that exercised executive, legislative and even judicial functions. In Benin Kingdom for instance, all activities were dominated by the special position occupied by the Oba of Benin, who was the pivot around which everything revolve”, he was the supreme religious head as well as the civil authority of the land.

As earlier enunciated, Alagoa (2005) demonstrates that in some political organization in the Old Eastern Region of Nigeria, some age grade groups combined with title holders in the administration of justice of the societies. This was a common practice in Rivers State.

Though the degrees to which the indirect rule system worked is different from place to place, in some centralized states, like the Hausa city states, it was highly successful, in western Nigeria with centralized authority, it also recorded huge successes. But in the East and South-South Nigeria, with many ethnic groups, operating different political systems, the success was minimal.

Apart from traditional rulers, Elders, Chiefs, Women groups and even youths were part of the mechanism of controlling violence. Another vital organ that is often employed to check violence is the deities of various communities. These deities as Chuku and Amadi (2005) explained act like judiciary system, certain cases that are not clear to human that may require supernatural interpretations were often referred to deities and oracles. It is believed that their sense of judgment is final as they are able to deliver equitable justice to people, regardless of their background. Second, some of these deities could not be bribed or compromised.

Quality of Traditional Rulers

In this 21st century every ethnic group and or kingdom is making efforts to ensure that they produce a quality natural ruler. Thus in addition of being knowledgeable on the traditional issues they are also well versed in western education and are therefore capable of representing their people in any capacity.

Fatile (2010) posits that most occupiers of traditional stools across the country are now modern, more educated and career persons, in their chosen field, before ascending to the stool of their fore-fathers. The immediate past Ooni of Ife, Oba Okenade Sijuade, was a successful international businessman. Oba Akiolu, the Oba of Lagos is a lawyer and a former Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG), the Sultan of Sokoto Alhaji Sada Abubakar retired from the Nigerian Army on the rank of Brigadier General in 2006 and was even the Defence Attache to Pakistan before his coronation as the Sultan. The Gbong Gwon of Jos, Da Jacob Gyang Buba, was a Comptroller General of the Nigeria Customs Service. The traditional ruler of Oko in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Obi Prof. Joseph Chike Edoziem, is a Professor of Nutrition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. Also, King T.J. Princewill, the Amayanabo of Kalabari is a retired professor from University of Port Harcourt. The Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido was a former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria. This brief illustrations demonstrate clearly that the Traditional rulers in most kingdoms in Nigeria are fully equipped in traditional and western knowledge. They remain relevant even in contemporary society (Fatile, 2010). It is the extent of this relevance that this paper seeks to explore the roles of traditional rules in controlling violence in Rivers State.

Sociological Perspective of Violence

There is no society that is violence free. There is also no society that could permanently check violence. In a nutshell, there is no society that has one hundred percent security, capable to eliminate violence entirely. As a result of this assertion, many scholars, particularly sociologists defer greatly with regard to the cause of violence or why it ever exists in the human society.

To most functionalists, as exemplified by the works of Emile Durkheim, violence as perpetrated by deviants is an integral aspect of any society. To this end, and as Chuku (2015) argues deviants, could be seen as agents of change. To Durkheim, those mala prohibita (crimes which violates social norms) functions in society as a means of defining the limits of acceptable behaviour, serving as vehicle for social change. From a Marxian point of view, it is the ruling class that defines what constitutes violence. According to Haralambos and Helbom (2004) “dominant class creates laws that will protect their own interest”. This dominant class may do things resulting to violence, but it could not be regarded as such, since they are the ruling class.

Akani (2010:127) defines indirect rule as a British system of administrating or ruling over her colonies with the use of the local chiefs or appointed intermediaries using traditional laws and customs with British Officials merely supervising the administration.

Challenges Facing the Traditional Institution

The first attempt to bring natural rulers to politics was during the colonial era as they were used as intermediaries between the local people and the colonial administrators. Consequently, the Chiefs occupied strategic position. There are perhaps no clear cut roles of traditional rulers in Nigeria. However, the Native Authority Ordinance No. 14 of 1916 gave traditional institutions powers as custodians of the culture and tradition in contemporary politics. Some of these functions include; maintaining peace and order in their respective domain through the use of traditional mechanism. Settlement of land, boundary and any other domestic disputes relating to traditions through the customary courts, to act as watch dogs in their local government areas.

Challenges Facing Traditional Rulers in Nigeria

In this contemporary era, traditional rulers are faced with some challenges; prominent among these challenges is the politicization of chieftaincy stools. The influence of money bag politics has seriously compromised the chieftaincy institutions in most parts of Nigeria.

In addition to this, some of the Chiefs who are supposed by tradition not be partisan are deeply involved in politics, therefore, this would affect their objective in handling matters relating to their party members and others.

The consequence of their being partisan is that they could not boldly pronounce and condemn violence involving people in their domain. Another challenge confronting the institution is external religion to Africa. This is key to the settlement of violence as many would complain that their new religious faith do not permit the use of certain traditional ritual in settling disputes.

Some Concrete Examples on How Traditional Rulers Control Violence.

In October 29, 1998, Ogbogoro Community in Obi/Akpor L.G.A had internal conflict relating to bloodletting in which more than five persons were killed. It took the efforts of the traditional Ruler of the Kingdom (Akpor) Late Eze Badumeru, O.O. Oriebe to minimize the violence. He quickly sent a palm front to the community. This signifies peace and by tradition it was mandatory to obey such traditional signal, because failure to do so, attract severe penalties, by the gods and goddess of the land. It was believed that these gods would release their wrath and this can manifest in various ways, such as diseases, plague, barrenness, death, low /poor harvest, natural disaster like heavy wind, thunder resulting to loss of life etc.

It was an effective way of checking violence in the society. The efficacy of this mechanism lies on the unarguable

evidences of what happened to people who disobeyed the chiefs and the gods. Criminals are also aware of this fact and hence, do not continue with their violence or misdeed, when once their matter has gotten to this extent.

Again, in 2005, it took the efforts of Ogbakor Ikwerre, a socio-cultural and political group of elites of Ikwerre extraction in Rivers State and some traditional Rulers notable among them was Eze O.O. Oriebe to stop war in Ogbakiri, in which more than 250 persons were killed. This they did by traditional means of appeasing the land and given of oaths to the six communities. With this peace return to the community and violence were abated considerably.

Two Cases in Ogoniland

The age-long crisis between K-Dere and B-Dere communities in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State is one of the classic cases where the traditional institution played a key role in resolving disputes and bringing peace to citizens. These communities are well-endowed with oil and gas deposits with oil pipelines crisscrossing everywhere in the communities. These neighbouring communities had been at loggerheads with themselves for several decades because of disputes over a parcel of land. Several lives have been lost and property worth hundreds of millions of naira destroyed, and in most cases social and economic life (marriage, schooling, farming, commercial, cultural festivities, etc.) of the affected communities seriously hampered.

The crises lingered for so long because of the use of conventional method of arbitration through the courts as a way of redressing the matter which did not yield the desired results. Beset by these unresolved crises, the community leaders opted for the traditional means of bringing peace to the communities. This was done through oath-taking by all the key actors, heads, and representatives of both communities who sworn to maintain peace and desist from acts of violence in the communities or face the wraths of the gods and ancestors. The ritual was elaborate and all-inclusive and all the parties kept to their vows till date.

Another case in point was the dispute between Gio and Kpoghor communities in Tai Local Government Area of Rivers State. These two communities are the only riverine communities in Tai and have boundaries with some communities in Ogu-Bolo Local Government Area. There was a jointly owned market located at the riverbank between Gio and Kpoghor which became the commercial nerve center of Tai that draws people from Okrika, Ogu/Bolo, Eleme, Gokana, Khana, Port Harcourt, and Oyigbo Local Government Areas on a weekly basis. All agricultural produce from Tai, Gokana, and partly Eleme, and Khana were sold in this market and the economies of the people in the catchment area were greatly enhanced.

When the crisis erupted over a minor misunderstanding regarding land ownership, the entire market was razed down over-night and several persons killed and injured. The Local

and State government intervened in an attempt to bring peace but all to no avail. It was only when the traditional means of oath-taking was employed that peace returned to the communities though the level of commercial activities in the communities particularly the functionality of the once renowned Gio market is yet to fully return after the colossal loss of property during the crises.

IV. SUMMARY

The central focus of this paper is on the traditional means of controlling violence in Nigeria with emphasis on Rivers State. The analysis in this paper reveals clearly that there are established mechanisms of controlling violence in traditional African societies, prior to colonialism. The paper also reveals that this method was effective and is still effective in this contemporary era.

The method adopted in this paper is purely qualitative, to this extent, it relied more on observation, interview and secondary data. A historical analysis of violence in Nigeria with focus on Rivers State reveals that the types of violence in pre-colonial Nigeria were minimal compared to violence in post-colonial Nigeria. In pre-colonial Nigeria, violence were mainly the use of knives against one or two persons. The large scale was involved tribal and inter-clan conflicts.

However, from the era of trans-Atlantic slave trade, violence increased following the need to acquire slaves for European slave merchant. This created a trajectory of violence not only in Nigeria, but on the whole of West Africa sub-region. Alagoa and Okorobia (2012) argue that it created routs in the entire region.

The trajectory of violence also indicates clearly that violence increase in Nigeria and particularly in Rivers State as a result of oil exploitation, oil politics and its contradiction in Nigeria. The spat of violence in Rivers State is further worsened by the politics of impurity in Nigeria. Unarguably therefore violence increased in Nigeria, working to the illegal possession of arms and sophisticated weapons that were not available in pre-colonial era

V. CONCLUSION

Predicated on the foregoing, the paper concludes: that African traditional society had well-established mechanism of controlling violence.

That as Africa culture is weakened by Western ideologies, so also it weakened their traditional mean of controlling violence.

That in course of adopting external religions, the very fabric of African societies as Mbiti (1989) observes was negatively affected, hence Africa believe in certain norms and values, particularly with regard to violence and how retributive justice would be meted out to people who hurt others, through nature and deities are jettison, thus leading to increase in violence.

The paper finally concludes that despite changes occasioned by western education, many Nigerians still accept the traditional means of settling violence.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The essence of any research is to proffer solution to societal problems and or challenges. In view of this, and the fact that traditional means was effective in the past, it is hereby recommended. However, this could be in addition to modern mechanism that is the police, prison and court system as currently practiced in Nigeria.

As a follow up, traditional rulers rulings concerning violence should be accepted in the law court as a way of administering justice.

In view of the roles of the traditional rulers as umpire and custodian of their peoples they should entirely refrain from partisan politics.

African traditional norms and values should be maintained and the youths taught to embrace it. Finally, government could assist by providing needed infrastructures for traditional rulers.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adesoji, A.O. (2010), Traditional Rulership and Modern Government in 20th Century Nigeria. In T. Babawale, A. Aloa and

- B. Adesoji. The Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria: Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd.
- [2] Afigbo, A.E. (1972), The Warrant Chiefs. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- [3] Ben-Amos, P.G. (1980), The Art of Benin. London: Themes and Hudson.
- [4] Boege, V. (2006), Traditional Approaches to Conflict Transformation-Potentials and limits. Bergh of Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management. Pg. 1-21.
- [5] Chuku, C.D. (2014) Understanding Sociological Perspective. Port Harcourt: Rohi Integrated Services.
- [6] Chuku, C.d. and Amadi, G.E. (2005), Akpor, A Perspectives of Ikwere History. Port Harcourt: Royal Publishers.
- [7] Chuku, C.D. and Emejuru, S.A. (Eds) (2014), Peoples and Culture of Rivers State. Port Harcourt: Rohi Integrated Services.
- [8] Gbafé, P.A. (1979). Benin under British Administration. London Longman.
- [9] John Scott, J. and Marshall, G. (2005), Oxford Dictionary of Sociology: New York. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Onoge, O.F. (1993), Social Conflict and Crime Control in Colonial Policies. Nigeria Past, Present and Future. Lagos: Mathouse Press Ltd.
- [11] Alagoa, E.J. and Okorobia, A.M. (2012) Memories of the Niger Delta Slave Routes. A publication of the Centre for the production of Tourism, Arts and Culture in Nigeria (EPTAC).
- [12] Mbiti, J.S. (1989), African Religion and philosophy. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- [13] "C-GIDD (Canback Global Income Distribution Database)". EIU Canback. Retrieved 2008-08-20.
- [14] "Nigeria: Administrative Division". City Population. Retrieved 28 November 2014.
- [15] "History of Rivers State". Rsha.gov.ng. Retrieved 30 November 2014.